



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

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During and After Flooding: What's Safe to Eat

Flood waters are contaminated with bacteria and other germs that can cause human illness. To prevent illness, **you should destroy the following items if they have been in contact with flood waters:**

- fresh meats and poultry
- fresh fruits and vegetables
- ready-to-eat foods
- lunch meats
- cheese
- home-canned foods
- medicines and cosmetics
- food packages that are not airtight
- flour and other commodities in bags
- packaged frozen foods
- crown-capped bottles
- screw-top glass containers

**When in doubt,
throw it out!**

Canned Foods

Water seepage can carry harmful bacteria into all but airtight containers. Carefully inspect all hermetically sealed (airtight) packages and metal cans. If the packages are leaking, bulging, or show evidence of puncture, destroy them.

You can salvage airtight packages with protective outer packaging and sealed metal cans in good condition, but **clean and disinfect them carefully before opening.**

To clean and disinfect cans of food:

1. Remove labels, but mark the can so you can identify the contents after disinfection. Colored crayon, wax pencil, indelible marker, or adhesive tape may be used.
2. **Wash** cans in warm water containing soap or detergent. Then **rinse** the detergent from the can.
3. **Disinfect** by soaking cans for at least 1½-2 minutes in a tub containing a disinfecting solution made by mixing a solution of 1 cup of household bleach to 5 gallons of water (or 2 tablespoons per quart). Use waterproof gloves, and do not wash your hands in this solution.
4. **Rinse** cans in clear water that is bottled, disinfected, or which has been boiled for at least 5 minutes.
5. **Re-inspect** the packages. If you have any doubt about the integrity of a package, do not use it.

If you have airtight foods that normally require freezing or refrigeration, please refer to the sections on the back of this page.

Refrigerated Foods

Flood conditions often disrupt natural gas, electricity, and other utilities. Refrigerators will not operate when electrical power is out. If your refrigerator has been out of operation for more than 6 hours, or if your food has been warmed to above 45°F for more than 3 hours, throw away all foods that need refrigeration.

Where power is out or turned off and alternate refrigeration is not available, you can salvage foods by putting them in insulated containers or ice chests and transport them to alternate refrigeration as soon as possible. In no case should they be left without refrigeration for more than 4 hours. Wherever possible, the temperature of the food should be held below 45°F. If dry ice is available, it may be used for temporary refrigeration or to preserve frozen foods.

A dial type metal probe thermometer can be used to check food temperatures. Many of these thermometers can be calibrated to 32° F in ice water. Use a container of ice and add water. Place the thermometer in the ice water and wait until the temperature stabilizes. A calibration nut is located under the dial and can be adjusted by turning with a wrench while the thermometer is still in the ice water.

Measure the temperature of food when you remove it from the refrigerator. **If you don't know the temperature at which food has been kept or for how long, throw it away.**

Frozen Foods

You should immediately transfer frozen foods to alternate freezers or to well-insulated chests or boxes containing dry ice. Throw away frozen foods that have been thawed and held above 45°F for more than 4 hours. You can refreeze or refrigerate foods thawed for up to 3 hours that still contain ice crystals and are as cold as if refrigerated.

Some foods can be re-frozen even if they are above 45°F for a day or more. These include frozen juices, commercially packaged fruit, breads, rolls, cakes, pie crusts, commercial bread dough, flour, corn meal, and nuts. There is some risk of mold, yeasty smell or texture loss, including sliminess, on the exterior of the food. If this occurs, discard the food.

Sealed bags of smoked fish require refrigeration at below 38°F. Discard those products if they are held above that temperature for more than 4 hours.

You can get more information by calling the Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department, 443-2584, or by visiting www.co.lewis-clark.mt.us/flooding.

The Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department's mission is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis & Clark County residents.